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NEWS — GOVERNMENT

Residents get first look at downtown improvement project

CHRIS STEVENS | CORRESPONDENT

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Kathleen Ogden Fasser, senior principal landscape architect with Toole Design Group, speaks with a resident while landscape architect Krithika Mohan looks on. The pair hosted an informational table on the town's Downtown Improvement Plan at Winchester High School on election night, March 26. WINCHESTER NEWS STAFF PHOTO/CHRIS STEVENS

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Residents who stepped out to do their public duty and vote last week also got a chance to check out the first public airing of the town's Downtown Improvement Project.

Addressing three areas, Main Street, Quill Rotary and the triangle south of the Post Office, Kathleen Ogden Fasser, senior principal landscape architect with Toole Design Group, said the project is as much about pedestrian experience as it is about slowing traffic. She, along with her colleague, landscape architect Krithika Mohan, spoke with residents entering and exiting the polls at Winchester High School on March 26.

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The section of Main Street targeted in the Winchester Downtown Improvement Project. WINCHESTER NEWS STAFF PHOTO/CHRIS STEVENS

Objective

The plan calls for narrowing the width of Main Street from the Mill Pond Falls to the rotary from 14 feet to 11 feet, widening the sidewalks, adding curb extensions or bump outs to shorten crosswalk distances and a tree evaluation. The rotary plan also includes narrowing travel lanes a widening sidewalks as well as reconfiguring all the corners of ea intersecting street entering the rotary.

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“So it’s leading cars where they should go,” Fasser explained.

An apron around the center of the rotary aims at giving room for turning trucks and aesthetically helps break up the great swath of pavement.

“We’ve also identified space under the bridge where trucks can pull over to make deliveries,” Fasser said.

Residents have three options to consider when it comes to the triangle. According to the plans, all three options add curb extensions at Thompson Street, continuous sidewalks along Waterfield Road and additional crosswalks.

Concepts 1 and 3 also retain what Fasser called two “really loved mailboxes.” The mail boxes are positioned so drivers can simply pull up to them and drop off mail without having to exit their vehicle, Fasser explained.

Option 2 adds parking spaces to the area as well as a small green space and parking/delivery space on Waterfield Road – but no mailbox drop off. Option 3 offers the same as Option 1 with the addition of parking/delivery spaces on Waterfield Road.

And despite all the changes in all three areas, Fasser said there will be absolutely no loss of parking.

“All the parking stays. There will be no reduction in parking the number of parking spaces,” she said.

She also said an arborist would be brought in to evaluate all the trees in all three areas to determine their health, remaining longevity and d
they should be replaced, moved or left alone.

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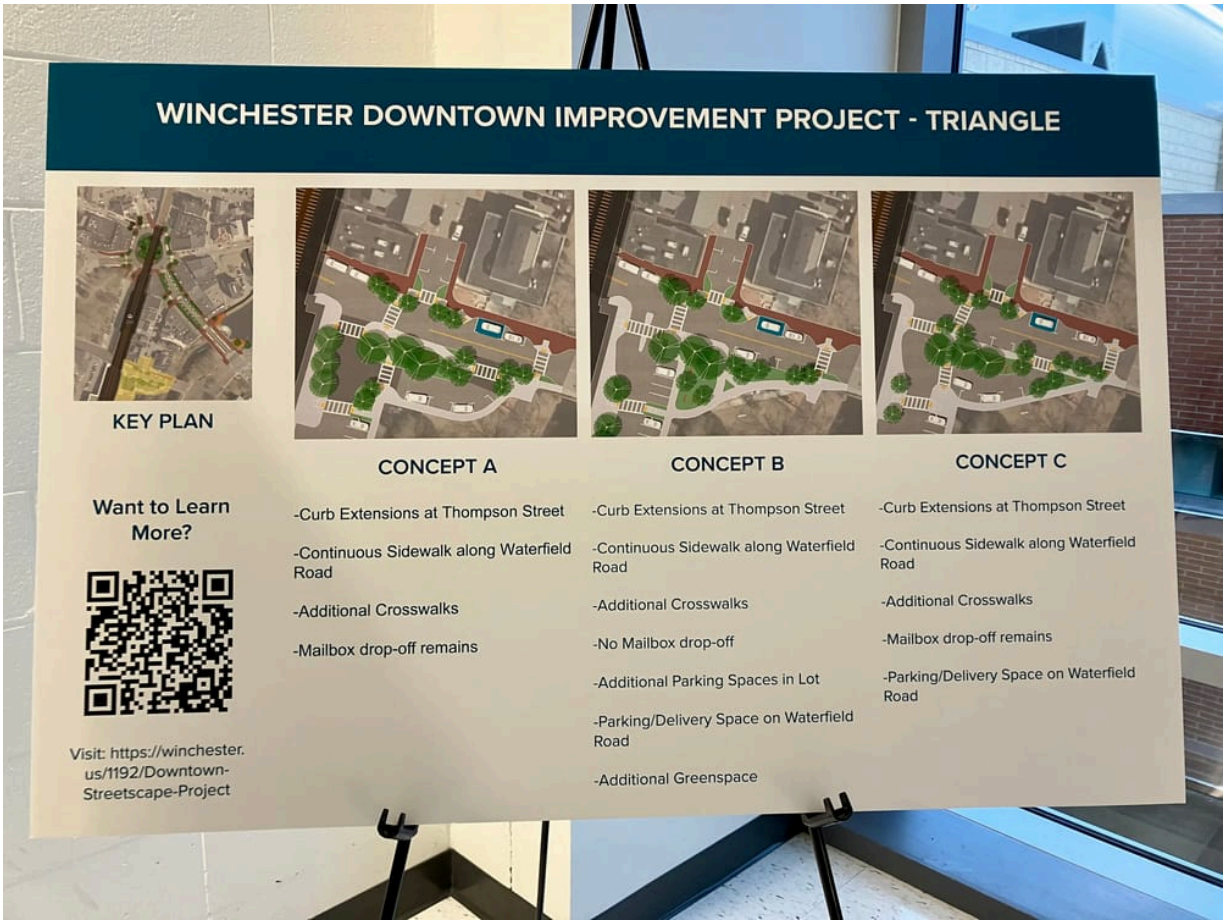

Preliminary design plans have three options for residents to consider when it comes to the triangle across the street from the Post Office. WINCHESTER NEWS STAFF PHOTO/CHRIS STEVENS

Why is it being done?

Fasser said widening the sidewalks allows for more foot traffic for local businesses.

“You want people to linger, to take their time, sit on benches,” she said. “And outdoor dining wouldn’t be using parking spaces.”

Wider sidewalks are also healthier for the trees that live there, Fasser said. More consideration is given to what is growing under the pavement as well as above than once was, she said. Planting or replanting trees further from businesses and with a solid underground base will alleviate sidewalk buckling, she explained.

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One resident said she hopes if the trees were replaced more thought would be given to creating a tree canopy.

“No more Bradford pears,” she said.

Fasser said she had heard the Bradford pear, a tightly packed tree that many consider invasive, had been over planted.

“The tree phase is still in discovery,” she added.

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Is narrower better?

Fasser said cars tend to go slower when objects are closer to them. Narrowing the streets brings parked cars, mailboxes, trees into closer proximity, “so cars will naturally go slower,” she said.

But resident Kathleen McGovern called a narrow street combined with curb extensions a bad idea. She pointed to the intersection of Main Street and Mount Vernon Street on one display board.

“Cars will go slower, there will be more room for pedestrians, I get all that,” she said. “But you will have to swing out even wider to make that turn with the bumpouts.”

McGovern also doubted that an 18-wheeler or an MBTA bus would ever be able to make any corner with the proposed changes.

“MBTA buses, think about that,” she said. “There’s not a lot of wiggle room now with the parked cars.”

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As for the sidewalks, McGovern said she thought the widths were fine as they are, it's the condition of said sidewalks that is horrible. She urged those involved with the project to remember that "Winchester is a town, not a city." And in her mind, wider sidewalks, bike lanes and the like are designs for city dwellers, not small towns.

She also urged them to "don't be Lexington." McGovern said Lexington installed new curbing that seems quite tall, making it difficult for some elderly and handicapped people to maneuver.

"You have to consider people who can't lift their feet very high, so curbing needs to be lower or gradual," she said. "And don't put a handicap space on a hill."

Resident Jamie Spencer worried about how the changes would impact local businesses and their customers, but Fasser said the plan would only improve the downtown experience for both parties.

"The major benefit is more space for outdoor dining," she said, adding the area would be fully handicap accessible and very walkable.

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Ariel view of the three sections under consideration in the Downtown Improvement Project. WINCHESTER NEWS STAFF PHOTO/CHRIS STEVENS

Timeline and funding

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"Who is paying for this?" McGovern asked before heading into vote. "Not the taxpayers."

"We have to identify a funding source," said Select Board member Michael Bettencourt, who was holding an election sign outside the high school last Tuesday.

Fasser said the project is part of the town's Master Plan, but is only in the very early stages of design. And before any plans are finalized, Toole Design Group will host another informational table at Town Day on Saturday, June 1.

An abutter and downtown business meeting will be scheduled and additional public forums will be held for input from the general public. A presentation was already made to the Chamber of Commerce in early March.

Bettencourt said it was COVID-19 that sort of drove this project. The pandemic pushed more people outside and led to outdoor dining and without it, they might not have seen this project roll out as it has, he said.

"It's really necessary to transform the downtown into the way people really want it," Bettencourt said. "We're seeing it in other communities. We're not reinventing the wheel."

For more information on the project, click Downtown Improvement Project | Winchester, MA - Official Website

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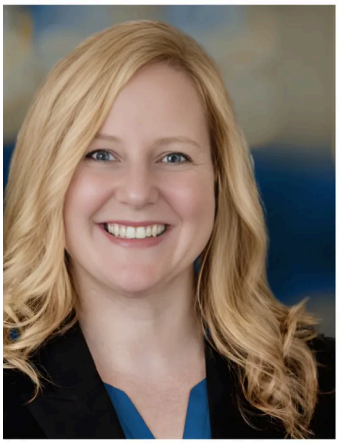

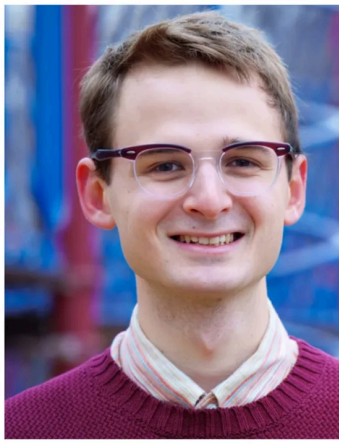

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By Talia Ho | Correspondent Fame. Fortune. And all that jazz. This spring, Winchester High School presents “Chicago: Teen Edition,” a bold musical that explores celebrity culture, media manipulation, and the cost of ambition. This iconic production is set in the 1920s. Performances will take place on March 13 and 14

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